

Inside Out; An Invisible Illness Explored Through Art

By

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A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

Art

University of Alaska Fairbanks

December 2018

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ABSTRACT

Inside Out: A Hidden Illness Explored Through Art is a thesis Project to fulfill the requirements of an MFA degree in visual arts. This project focused on ceramics and photography inspired by the unusual combination of medical imagery and heavily textured ocean landscapes. Through this body work, a better understanding of invisible illness is revealed.

During my first year as an MFA student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I was invited to be an apprentice to Simon Levin, a woodfire potter specializing in functional wares fired in a Japanese style Anagama Kiln. One month into my apprenticeship I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, an unpredictable and incurable autoimmune disease that disrupts the central nervous system causing progressive physical and cognitive deficits. My apprenticeship experience dramatically changed course as I began investigating and adapting to new ways of working in clay. I have had to redefine my identity as a ceramic artist as a result of this diagnosis and the impact it has had on my daily life. My interpretation of this new medical diagnosis has resulted in exciting, detailed surfaces and textures on my functional ceramics. Through this exploration, I have begun to form a connection between the textures and lines of medical imaging and my love for the subtle beauty of the ocean landscape. Exploring these subjects through their unusual and unexpected combinations has provided me with a healing and introspective experience that has greatly influenced my recent work.

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Acknowledgments

This project would not have been a success without the knowledge, support, generosity and wisdom of so many people. Many, many thanks to every one of you:

Aaron Yeaton and my family for their endless support and encouragement and for being there to help me become the person and artist I am today.

My committee for generously sharing their time and knowledge with me the past three years as I worked my way through the MFA program and for always believing in me:

Jim Brashear

Zoe Marie Jones

Charles Mason

Teresa Shannon

A special thank you to Zoe Jones for her unending dedication to me as a student, her generosity as a mentor and support as a good friend. I will sincerely miss being your TA!

Jamie Smith for introducing me to drawing and taking the fear out of learning something new and unfamiliar.

My MFA cohort and studio mates for your support, laughter, and encouragement. A special thanks to my studio mate, Wendy for all her support and for all the long, heartfelt conversations we would have in the graduate studio.

Olena Ellis, Anvil Williamson and Sara Hensel for your never-ending support and encouragement through thick and thin. Our time spent critiquing each other's work, traveling to conferences and workshops together, and way back when, when we were all in one studio making work together was some of the best times spent with some of the most wonderful people.

Mary Van Muelken and the RAP program for supporting me through a transition into the MFA program and always helping me to find creative way to remain an active part of the science community bridging together all of my interests and dreams.

Simon Levin for allowing me the opportunity to be an apprentice at Mill Creek Pottery and supporting me through a tough medical diagnosis, never letting me turn my back on being a potter.

Sarah Manriquez for photographing and documenting my work process and final gallery exhibition.

A big thank you to the entire Art Department and to Carol Hoefler for everything you do!

Finally, I have to thank Atigun, my service dog, for spending long hours in the studio with me, helping me to regain my independence and always making me smile!

Introduction

In February of 2017, mid-way through the M.F.A. program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and one month into an apprenticeship with Simon Levin, a ceramicist specializing in wood fired pottery, I was unexpectedly and abruptly diagnosed with an aggressive form of Multiple Sclerosis (MS). The symptoms developed over several months and as they increased in severity, I struggled to hide my discomfort and pain for fear of judgement from my peers and mentors. MS is a hidden disease—one that attacks the protective coating of nerves around the spinal cord with unpredictable and damaging effects. This disease remains an enigma: symptoms shift undetected beneath the surface causing degenerative physical and cognitive effects. No two people have the same experience, and an individual's symptoms can change daily. For these reasons, MS creates a world of uncertainty. As I contemplated how my future as a ceramic artist would unfold, I began investigating and adapting to new ways of working in clay and searching for some way to identify with the impacts M.S. has on my daily life and work.

As this is an invisible illness hidden inside of what appears to be an undamaged shell, quiet and introspective exploration has provided me with an artistic outlet that both gives my illness a voice and fuels my creative process. My work is functional and utilitarian, yet combines the visceral with artifice by using tangible objects and personal experience to give a voice to the intangible. Therefore, my work not only gives a voice to my own personal struggles, but - more importantly - promotes awareness and advocacy for those who have not found a voice to express their own struggle with an invisible illness.

My work combines references to medical imagery and my personal interpretation of the hidden interior of my body and the effects MS has on it. I use texture and line to reference the nervous system and tiny porcelain sprig molds that stand out from the surface to represent

lesions that appear as bright, irregular shapes randomly dotted across my brain and spine. Delicately pressing each piece of porcelain into the exterior of my pots also creates volume that is reflected on the interior. The interior indentations left behind during this process are a direct reference to the impact that the exterior has on the interior, thereby expressing the inverse of the effects of invisible illness. Thick slip and rich textures cover the exterior of my pots, alluding to the cyclical motion of ocean waves. Lines in the sand, shells, and driftwood strewn across the heavily textured beach are reminders of seascape cycles are present in the rhythmic ebb and flow of the tides. Similarly, symptoms associated with MS run in cycles of intensity, and with each relapse an invisible scar is left behind in the form of a new brain lesion or tremor of the hand. The ocean, a place I seek inspiration, solitude and healing, is ironically reminiscent of the very reason I require such sacred moments and places.

I do not want this diagnosis to define me or my work as a ceramic artist, but as a result of my constantly changing circumstances I have a renewed sense of excitement and purpose. Although this illness is hidden within my body and causes uncertainty in my daily life, my artistic practice brings me clarity and focus and is essential to my healing process.

Background and Influences

I first came to Alaska in the summer of 2009 after accepting a job with the US Forest Service as a Wilderness Kayak Ranger out of Juneau. After my seasonal job had ended, I had no intent on leaving Alaska and nearly 10 years later I am still here! Alaska has become not only my home, but a major source of inspiration for my work and my lifestyle. Living on an island and traveling by kayak was a magical introduction to this place. Since those galvanizing experiences, I have always craved the ocean.

Hours can fly by as I meander along the tideline scouring the sand and piles of dried up seaweed for small treasures of shells, beach glass or pieces of driftwood shaped like a mythical beast. I return home with sandy pockets filled with my beach loot and commence organizing my new collections, meticulously placing the most perfect finds in prime spots. Many of my treasures end up in my studio; some purely for aesthetic reasons, some for inspiration, and some for use as tools. Only the best are used for making molds and replicas to be applied to larger projects.

Since I entered into the MFA program at UAF I have visited one of my favorite ocean towns no less than a dozen times. I am not quite sure what it is about Homer, Alaska but I just can't seem to get enough of the place. Not only do I tirelessly walk the beaches there, but I spend hours behind a camera lens documenting the story that is left behind by the receding tide. Textures in the sand, crab carcasses, barnacle encrusted rocks and shiny tangles of bull kelp keep my attention and eyes focused on the ground, hunting the tiniest of details bathed in a perfect cast of light.

One of my earliest memories as a child was running on a pure white sandy beach, the wind blowing in the ruffles of my polka dotted swimming suit. To this day I still have a small baby food jar filled with the perfectly white sand of that beach on Sanibel Island, Florida. If I had to guess, I may have only been 2 going on 3 years old but that seashore made a lasting impression. A treasure filled, sandy beach was the last thing I thought I would find, nonetheless fall in love with, when I first came to Alaska, but now I know this is why I stay.

Shortly after my first summer in Alaska I went on to complete a bachelor's degree in Resource Management. My eyes had been opened to a world of natural wonders and the need for its advocacy and protection. I earned a bachelor degree in Recreation Resource Management

from the University of Montana in 2011. Although my previous academic experience is primarily focused in the sciences, I was always drawn to the arts and maintained a relationship with ceramics throughout my academic career. While residing in Juneau, Alaska I taught at a local art cooperative for several years and studied ceramics as an apprentice under local potter and fellow teacher, Joyce Payne. This experience led me to become a confident and prolific potter and instilled a passion for experiential teaching and continuous learning.

As an apprentice to a production potter, I learned invaluable skills such as consistency, replication, and quantity. However, this experience has also led to unexpected challenges throughout my journey as an MFA student. For example, I am now tasked with “unlearning” some of the traits I have inherited from my mentor, while regaining a focus on aesthetic and conceptual qualities.

After struggling to leave behind my production pottery background in favor of a creative approach to find a new body of work, I was able to find fresh inspiration during a midwinter trip to Homer in 2016. As I sat on the beach in Homer picking through seaweed, driftwood and beach pebbles I felt like I had come home. I am drawn to the idea of conveying a “sense of place” in a body of functional work. In an attempt to do just that I have been combining my work in photography with functional ceramics to refer to an idea larger than simple textured pots and landscape photographs. Using macro lenses, I am able to capture detailed images of textures and patterns that can be referenced or replicated on functional pottery through the use of layering surface designs and organic forms. Displaying sets of functional wares alongside photographs taken with a macro lens will imply a connection that is both open for interpretation and suggestive. It is my intent that the forms, textures and surface designs on the pots will convey a commonality with the images being displayed.

As a maker, this combination of object and image evokes the remembered sensations of smell, touch and taste, which are nuanced with the sometimes softly fragrant, sometimes acridly pungent atmosphere of the landscape that inspires me. The viewer's senses may inspire emotions or reactions much different than my own. As an artist, it is important to me that the images and objects create a powerful combination of ideas that will transport the viewer to a place that is special to me and a huge part of what has inspired me to become a potter.

Diagnosis: Relapsing Remitting Multiple Sclerosis

I was officially diagnosed with Relapsing Remitting Multiple Sclerosis (MS) on February 3rd, 2017. Little did I know many of the symptoms I had been experiencing for the last 2 years were all caused by MS. After being misdiagnosed several times, I began to write off many of my own symptoms as stress induced or simply the effects of being an overambitious graduate student. After three arduous days of loading and firing a cross draft kiln in the middle of a blustery, Wisconsin January, my symptoms peaked, landing me in the emergency room. I suspected a back injury from overuse but to my surprise the Neurologist came into my room bearing the unexpected diagnosis of Relapsing and Remitting Multiple Sclerosis.

According to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, "In multiple sclerosis (MS), damage to the myelin coating around the nerve fibers in the central nervous system (CNS) and to the nerve fibers themselves interferes with the transmission of nerve signals between the brain, spinal cord and the rest of the body. Disrupted nerve signals cause the symptoms of MS, which vary from one person to another and over time for any given individual, depending on where and when the damage occurs."

There are 4 types of MS; Clinically Isolated, Relapsing and Remitting, Secondary Progressive and Primary Progressive, and the symptoms and severity can greatly vary. Often

after a few years patients diagnosed with Relapsing and Remitting MS will be diagnosed with Secondary Progressive MS, meaning that the disease is progressing faster and some of the symptoms experienced during relapses do not recur with flare ups, but are permanent. No two people have exactly the same symptoms, and each person's symptoms can change or fluctuate over time. One person might experience only one or two of the possible symptoms while another person experiences many more. Common symptoms include fatigue, walking difficulties, balance issues, tremors, numbness and tingling, weakness, seizures, vision problems, bladder issues, pain and cognitive deficits, which are among the most common but by no means a comprehensive collection of the symptoms of MS.

Most of these symptoms can be managed effectively with medication, rehabilitation and other therapeutic strategies. MS and some of its symptoms can be treated with oral and intravenous medications and different types of therapy. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) is used to track the progression of lesions that often appear on the brain and spinal cord. These lesions cannot be reversed and depending on their location, cause many of the symptoms listed previously. Although MS is not a fatal condition, complications from the symptoms have proven to be. There is no cure for MS. This is a progressive disease, which means that with treatment MS can be slowed but not stopped. The damage caused by demyelination of the nervous system is irreversible and permanent.

The Life of an Apprentice

When I agreed to be an apprentice to Simon Levin, I did not have a comprehensive understanding of the physical and mental challenges that were ahead of me. I first met Levin when he came to UAF as a visiting ceramic artist in the winter of 2015. During his workshop he spoke at great length about his apprentices and how they were an integral part of his high

functioning studio. Over a lunch break I took the opportunity to speak with Levin one on one about becoming an apprentice and how to go about applying for this position. Nearly a year later, I made arrangements with Levin to meet up at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). Although Levin and I wrote back and forth a few times within the past year, I was not expecting our meeting to result in an offer to be his apprentice. In January of 2016 my husband and I drove from Alaska, through Canada to northern Wisconsin. The



Figure 1: Apprenticeship work duties, 2016

apprenticeship started off fast and furious. I immediately was expected to produce 100 pots to be put into a firing scheduled for Feb. 1st. Additionally, I was responsible for 15 hours of studio work a week. This work ranged from building shelves for the gallery to hauling 5-gallon buckets of water from the house to the studio, and even bucking up log rounds in a snowstorm. The work was physically demanding and sometimes quite thankless, but in the end, it contributed to the studio running smoothly. By the end of each day I barely had energy to sit down and produce work of my own but I did.

Throughout this apprenticeship I learned a lot about what it takes to run and maintain a studio, but even more so, I learned about myself and what I am capable of.

We were finally ready to begin loading the cross-draft kiln on Levin's property. Several other potters showed up and a few former apprentices came to lend a hand and show me the ropes. I vividly remember loading up long boards full of bisqued pots and balancing them across one shoulder while I gingerly walked them outside to the kiln yard to be loaded. I was tired, it was a really cold day and all I wanted to do was prove that I was tough enough to get the job done. With a full board of plates perched over my shoulder I softly stepped out of the studio and

over the berm of snow, trying to avoid the patches of ice. Before I knew what happened, I found myself on the ground surrounded with broken pots. My legs and feet had been cold and tingly, but I didn't pay much attention to it until they refused to hold me up anymore. I got up and brushed myself off, with my ego and my backside a little bruised. I kept pushing through the day and we managed to get the kiln loaded and candling by midnight. The next couple of days we took shifts watching the kiln and keeping it full of fuel, in this case split logs and scrap wood. The shifts were long and sleep was scarce. My body continued to fight against me, with tingling limbs, weak hands and ever worsening bladder incontinence, but I managed to complete all of my shifts and the firing was complete 3 days later. It was not until we were ready to unload the kiln that I was convinced by others to go see a doctor. After several days in the hospital and hours in an MRI machine, the doctors came back with my diagnosis. At that point I had to make a decision...can I still be a potter? Should I still be a potter?

After spending a few weeks away from the studio, Levin and I agreed that it would be best if I continued to heal and work at my own pace throughout the summer. I stayed at my mom's house, close to the hospital and my medical team. Slowly I regained the energy and confidence to carve out a small studio space in the sunroom and began making work again. I spent many days just sitting at my wheel, not even touching clay, but thinking and preparing my body to do work again. My strength, coordination and steadiness had changed dramatically in the past few months but I was determined to learn how this new body of mine works. Even though I worked slowly that summer, I learned to work smart and within the new boundaries set by the neurological damage. My new pace offered me an opportunity to work with clay in different ways by spending more time altering the surface at the wet stages and exploring different ways of manipulating a once familiar canvas. As I began working outside of my

comfort zone with new and larger forms, and exciting surface treatments, I also began finding inspiration in people and places that I had not discovered before.

Historic References

The history of ceramics dates back thousands of years and encompasses many cultures and traditions. Although interesting, I have always found it difficult to sincerely latch onto any one style of historic ceramics or any specific ceramic art movement. It was not until I was grading papers as a teaching assistant that I came across a few historic ceramic objects that resonated with me and my work. I began researching a unique vessel call a pyx.

At its peak, the Roman Empire ruled a vast territory that often lured travelers and nomadic groups of religious followers. At a time when citizenship was extended to all free born males, Rome and its vast territories began distributing coins, erecting statues, baths and basilicas. Art also began to flourish throughout the varied regions and geographical quilt of local cultures. Each region would produce and disseminate representative artworks across the Roman Empire. The city of Constantinople was the foremost center of commerce and trade in Europe during the Byzantine era. Trade items were spread throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Pyxides, or covered boxes, were fairly common objects found in the meccas of trade. Made of durable, yet malleable white ivory, these boxes would depict detailed scenes of diptychs and triptychs, providing a better understanding of the use of these boxes and their owners. The images presented narratives of the owner, often travelers seeking a religious site or embarking on a pilgrimage. The Metropolitan Museum elaborates on these carves boxes, “Examples with images of Christ healing the ill were probably used to conserve the Eucharistic



Figure 2: Pyx, 500s Byzantine, Metropolitan Museum

elements. The use of examples with pagan imagery is not known, although such containers probably held personal objects such as cosmetics or jewelry.”

I was drawn to this form and its function, even though the traditional pyx were not made of clay. Researching ivory carving, I began to draw many similarities to that of carving or altering clay. Furthermore, I was drawn to the purpose of these covered boxes. Their purpose was to carry small, sacred or personal objects while their owner traveled to places of great spiritual importance or healing. The outside was ornately decorated with the story of the owner and maybe their motivations for undertaking a pilgrimage. The details and adornments I add to my ceramic objects also tell a story and relate back to my inspirations and influences. Furthermore, pairing my ceramic work with my photography creates a story of place-based healing and a quest for deeper understanding of something intangible. Although our motivations may be different in specific intention and time, I drew many similarities in our pilgrimage and sacred journeys.



Figure 4: Ampullae 1300-1600CE, Salisbury and South Wilshire Museum

Pilgrimage flasks are similar historic ceramic forms that resonated with me throughout my research of historic influences. Pilgrimage flasks, or ampullae were made of a variety of materials including glass, metal and ceramic, most dating back to the 5th-7th century. Popular throughout Egypt, Europe and the Middle East, these vessels were meant to hold and transport water or oil to be brought back from religious sites along the great pilgrimage.

Used primarily by travelers and religious pilgrims, the exterior surface was often adorned with images of the owner or inspirations for their journey. Small detailed emblems of ownership were often embossed on the



Figure 3: Pilgrimage Flask 4th-7th century, Byzantine, Metropolitan Museum

edges of the image or narrative. I was most intrigued by those identifying marks that appeared to be seashells, symbolizing an individual who had ties to the ocean.

As I gather much of my own artistic inspiration from the ocean and the fluctuating



Figure 6: Mycenaean Wave Pattern Jar, 1400-1000BC

landscape found where the water meets the land, it was only natural that I look to the seafaring cultures of the past. Historically, many cultures drew inspiration from their surrounding landscape and the resources they depended on to survive and thrive. The Mycenaean culture is a great example of artistic inspiration drawn from a relied-upon landscape and resource. For the

Mycenaean culture the ocean provided a means of transportation, food, trade and much more. The pottery created by the Mycenaean civilization (1550-

1050 BCE) was influenced by an earlier Minoan culture that often depicted natural forms and animals found in or near the sea. Although many of these designs were adopted by all types of artisans, they often subscribed to a more schematic and less lifelike representation. Such decorations and depictions of sea life became dominant throughout the Mediterranean and other communities and cultures along the seashore.



Figure 5: Mycenaean Octopus Jar, 1200-1100BC

The Mycenaean civilization not only admired pottery for the aesthetic beauty but also for its functionality. Pottery was used by ordinary people who were unable to afford the more costly metal objects for their everyday needs. I share this age-old ideal of creating beautiful, functional pottery that remains aesthetically and financially accessible to a large variety of users. Although the vessel forms that I create differ from the large jars and high stemmed drinking vessels of

many Greek cultures, my influences and love of the sea have their similarities. Finally, I am

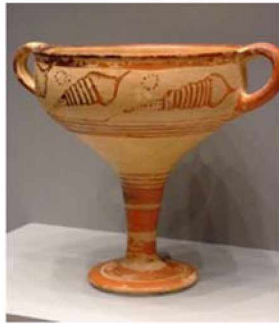


Figure 7: Mycenaean Kylix, 1400-1050BC, Metropolitan Museum

particularly interested and inspired by the prospects of joining the ongoing conversation amongst potters and historical vessel makers. As makers we have historically examined skillfully made objects from past cultures, creating a connection not only to the past user of a particular object, but also to the act of making. I feel that this connection can be brought to light by further immersing myself in the historic creation and use of functional ceramic work of past civilizations such as the

Mycenaeans.

When researching historical influences, I also became intrigued by the history of medical imagery and how science and art developed in the same arena by leaning on one another to support medical discoveries and bring enlightenment to society. *The Sick Rose; Disease and the Art of Medical Illustration*, by Richard Barnett delves into the unique history of medical illustration. Barnett begins by stating, “Artists, craftsmen, and publishers emerged collaborative medical illustrations.” (p.22) I found his writing especially intriguing as I have spent much time analyzing my own MRI scans, Optical Nerve Images, and doctor’s notes trying to gather a better understanding of the invisible illness that was coursing through me. Barnett’s writing reflects my own thought process when he profoundly states, “How should an artist depict the flesh and the soul, and what thoughts and feelings should such a depiction evoke?” (p.20) I used my interpretation of this medical imagery and diagnosis descriptions to inform the surfaces and textures that I applied to my ceramics. In describing the height of medical illustration in the 18th century Barnett himself quotes from Parisian anatomist Marie-Francois-Xavier Bichat, “You may take notes for twenty years,...and all will be to you only a confusion of

symptoms. Which, not being united in one point, will necessarily present only a train of incoherent phenomena. Open up a few bodies; this obscura will soon disappear, which observation alone would never have been able to dissipate.” (p. 26)

Although I once felt it outlandish to utilize my naive interpretation of medical imagery to better inform others about my artistic process and personal journey of healing, I now understand that this has been a long standing tradition that has even benefitted medical ingenuity. Combining the arts and sciences to bring a better awareness to the public is not a revolutionary idea and has helped diagnosed many medical conditions throughout the past centuries. Not only has art proven to be a staple in my healing process, it has also allowed me to better understand the scientific nuances of my diagnosis and is helping me prepare for a future of living with an invisible illness.

Contemporary Influences

Artists like Jennifer Allen, Deb Schwartzkopf, Simon Levin and Adam Field have



Figure 8: Pitchers, Jen Allen, 2012

enlightened my artistic process and inspired me to explore new styles and techniques. Through researching these artists, I am discovering that breaking out of old work habits can be hugely beneficial. Changing the scale, size, techniques and methods can segue into new forms and inform new bodies of work. Through researching these artists and their work processes, I learned to explore the act of returning to the work

and the amount of time that I spend with each piece. The act of returning leaves very different marks on the surface, presenting the user with a difference of feel, and an alternative means of interpreting the piece. At an earlier stage the material retains the information from the artist's

touch very differently than when it is in a drier state. This has been a major revelation in my work and process, fueling new ideas that I am increasingly excited to explore.

Continuing the conversation of functionality and influences, I look to many contemporary ceramic artists to compliment my historic influences. Although I have more influential ceramics artists' than I have time to mention, I will start with one artist who originally caught my eye as I first started to seriously pursue functional ceramics as an MFA student. I first started researching Jen Allen after discovering a few of her "bone yard" pots displayed on the shelf in the UAF ceramics studio. I was drawn to the soft forms and whimsical details of her pots. Each component had great detail, which would lead your eye to handle attachments, the underside of lids, and even to the underside of the foot of the pot. After learning more about her educational background and where she draws inspiration from, I became further interested in researching her work and imparting components of her technical process into my own work.

Deb Schwartzkopf's and Jen Allen's work both exemplifies the use of patterns and darting, similar to what you would find in the work of a seamstress or tailor. The use of paper patterns allows the maker to experiment with shape and form without sacrificing time, effort and resources. Most importantly, this technique does not commit an experimental pattern to large piece of clay, but rather uses the paper pattern to make non-permanent alterations. I have used patterns to create changes in forms and volume by accentuating certain portions of pots and creating curves and interesting attachment points. I have also utilized patterns in my work to experiment with spouts and altered handles. These patterns can



Figure 9: Tea Pot, Deb Schwartzkopf, 2014

be held up to the profile of a pot and adjusted until the appendage appropriately fits the piece. This provides the template for the to-be-attached clay form to the pot.

Adam Field's work differs greatly from that of Schwartzkopf's and Allen's but similarities can be drawn between the three. All 3 artists work in porcelain because of its ability to be worked and manipulated without pulling any large, rough particle (grogg) to the surface, leaving a smooth textured surface even after alterations and manipulations have been made. Additionally, clean, white porcelain allows glazes to be bright in color and transparent when desired. Field's work taught me techniques to work with porcelain and make larger forms. Because of the fine, regular particle size of porcelain, it can prove quite difficult to work with - especially when throwing large forms on the wheel. Field's work also sparked my interest in celadon glazes, which has a translucent quality that highlights carving, texture and seams. This type of glazing was important in my work because I wanted glaze to exemplify the textures on my pots, rather than mask them.

Simon Leven's work offers yet another set of skills and aesthetics that influenced my current body of work. Levin specializes in wood fired, functional ceramics fired in a traditional anagama style kiln. Although his work is quite different from mine or my other influences, I find his work process and ethics desirable. Through my apprenticeship with Levin I was allowed to explore several different types of clay bodies, glazing techniques, and firing techniques, that cemented my preference for a porcelain clay body and opened my eyes to different ways of achieving surface textures and colors. I was also learned the usefulness of wadding (small balls of clay mixture used to lift pots off of kiln shelves or space stacked work).



Figure 10: Mug, Simon Leven, 2009

Levin uses wadding not only for its traditional purposes but also to direct flames across each piece creating color and pattern variation.

Levin's day to day studio routine is rigorous and organized to maximize efficiency. Work flow is continuous and planned out several months in advance in order to maintain inventory in existing galleries, art shows and online stores. Woodfired ceramics requires a lot of work and planning. Wood needs to be acquired, dried, split and stacked. Different diameter wood is needed at different stages of the firing process; therefore running out of wood could be detrimental to maintaining the proper heat needed for a successful firing. Glaze is applied differently and in a minimal fashion to allow the ash and atmosphere of the kiln to do most of the work. Glazes, wadding, clay and slips are constantly being made and kept in full supply. The cyclical nature of Levin's studio practices allowed me to experience the efficiency of such a well-oiled machine, instilling in me a new set of skills and a stronger work ethic.

Ceramic Process & Materials

As a ceramic artist, my process usually begins with inspiration, such as an object I find on the beach or observations of changes and transitions in the landscapes around me. Yet, lately, I have started to look to my most recent work as a source of inspiration. Each cycle of work



Figure 11: Altered Mug, J. Chamberlain, 2016

builds on previous ideas by pushing forms, concepts and surface design in new directions. I have also become very interested and disciplined about photographing things in the world that intrigue me or reference a functional form in some way. I often find these photographic inspirations in nature. As I process my images, I begin

to discover what it is about each image that captured my attention, such as composition, lines, patterns, and textures.

With these many new discoveries I am finding myself working with more complex forms, many of which require multiple attached components and alterations. Working with larger forms and doing a vast majority of the manipulation at a wetter state has allowed me to explore components of pieces that I previously struggled with, such as spouts, handles and complex alterations. Working in this softer state has also allowed me to further explore textures and mark making.

Although these textures are not the main focus of the piece, I use them in such a way that invites the user to explore the piece and discover new layers with each use and from different perspectives.



*Figure 12: Slab built
Handle Pattern, J.
Chamberlain, 2017*

The surface designs on my work begin when I am creating the form on the potter's wheel. I use tools to erase any sign of touch or any tool markings from the surface. This gives me a blank canvas that clearly reveals the layering process without becoming confused with the lines left by the maker. The textures and lines I chose to keep are intentional and purposeful. They serve as a transition point on the form or indicate a transition in the glazes of the final piece. By erasing most of the marks made in the throwing process, I am able to highlight the intentional tool markings and process makers that speak to my concept. My forms are becoming filled with multi-dimensional, layered surfaces and textures, and shapes are layered on top of another to create complex functional forms. My technical process has become multi-faceted and layered with a variety of different approaches and interactions with each pot. The marks I make on each form are layered to entice curiosity by evoking different emotional responses for the user to sift through and interpret.

Over the past several years the materials I choose to use have varied from cone 6 clay and electric kilns to cone 10 porcelain fired in a biofuel soda kiln, to my final body of work, which was fired in a large gas fired cone 10 kiln. I have become fairly attached to using porcelain as a clay body and working with glazes conducive to firing in a cone 10 gas kiln. I am drawn to porcelain because of its plasticity and pure white color. With a porcelain clay body, I am able to return to the work many times throughout the drying cycle to manipulate the form, add attached components and clean up the surface without interfering with the texture of the form in an undesirable way. The white color of this clay body provides a clean, neutral surface to work from, allowing the glaze colors to be bright and true. As porcelain is finicky in nature it has its fair share of difficulties, such as its tendency to warp. Even so, I am finding that the good qualities of porcelain outweigh the bad.

Almost all of the forms that I make begin on the potter's wheel. The potter's wheel allows me to throw uniform, clean forms that will then be altered in a variety of ways later in the process, thereby adding volume and movement. While the clay is relatively wet, I often push and pull the walls of clay to create areas of volume. I will also apply undulating lines using a metal rib tool that act as a place for the glaze to break but also reference the place on the landscape where the water meets the land. From this line I will decide where to apply textures using a thick porcelain slip, which is a less viscous form of clay that has a liquid, flowing quality. I apply the thick slip with my hands and large paint brushes that also add unique textures. Once the slip has dried enough to handle the piece, I add small sprig forms that I also make from a porcelain clay body. The sprigs often



Figure 13: Sprig Molds, J. Chamberlain, 2018

reference the objects in nature that one would discover walking along the seashore. As I press the sprig into the still malleable clay body, the lines I had previously created will begin to rise and fall giving the body of the pot movement and volume. Additionally, I can create the sense of volume by pressing the springs deep into a pocket in the clay allowing the surrounding area to billow around it referencing the movement of fabric or water. After all alterations have been made and the work has completely dried it is bisque fired and ready to glaze.

I map out the glaze combinations on each pot. Using the lines and alteration as cues to glaze changes, I make notes on the pot with a lead pencil indicating which glaze color will be applied to each area and in what order. Since I typically use multiple glazes on each piece, I think about how the colors and textures of the glaze will interact with each other and the underlying surface of the pot. Additionally, I consider the functionality of each piece, as some glazes are better to use on functional surfaces than others. As an example, I line all my mugs, cups and pouring vessels with a stable, clear glaze that is food safe and durable. Some glazes that I use create beautiful, lush surfaces but do not stand up to cutlery or are not food safe. Such



Figure 14: Glazing, J. Chamberlain, 2018

glazes are only applied to the exterior of certain pots. As I choose and apply glazes, I am considering the colors and transitions found in the landscapes that influence me. Most of my recent work references landscapes where water meets and interacts with the land, which I represent with a change in glaze color and texture. I enjoy how translucent blue and green celadon glazes are reminiscent of ocean water. These glazes used in combination with earthy matte glazes may reference sand or highlight the textures reminiscent of my own brain MRI images. I take special care to

keep any sprig molds free of glaze. After some experimenting, I found that I prefer to conserve

and celebrate the pure, glossy white surface of unglazed porcelain. For me, leaving small details free of glaze draws the user in and creates a sense of exploration, leading the eye around the object and invoking a tactile response to the change in texture and finish.

Throughout the MFA program I have dedicated a lot of time and effort to glaze research and creating a glaze palette that would complement my work, both in ceramics and



Figure 15: Glazed work in kiln, J. Chamberlain, 2018

photography. It is important to me that the glaze colors reference the colors that I draw from on the beach and surrounding landscape, but also that my glazes are technically sound and free of flaws that would impair the functionality of the work. Many of my glazes begin with a base glaze. From this base I can test the fit of the glaze on my clay body and further refine the recipe as needed. From this base I can add and manipulate colors and viscosity, ensuring that the glaze can be applied properly to achieve the desired effect.

I look to my research to find base glazes and recipes that I can use or manipulate to suit my palate preferences. For the past 2 years I have used a program called Air Table to catalog all of the glaze recipes that I have tried and tested, including those that have proven to be undesirable. I do this so that I can look back on recipes to compare chemical combinations, color effects, and overall tolerances of certain chemical compositions. If I come across a new recipe that I would like to try, I first look at similar recipes and read my notes on what I liked and disliked about the results before I spend the time and effort to make a new glaze. Using Airtable, I am able to list my preferred glaze palette, keep accurate records of my preferred glaze recipes, notes and testing results, glaze fit,

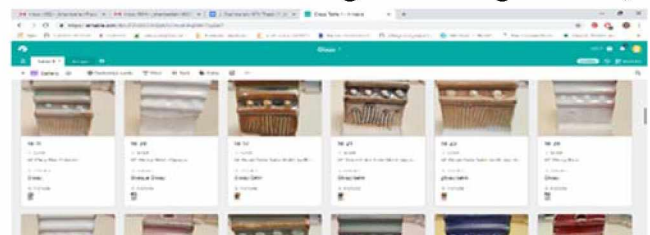


Figure 16: Airtable, J. Chamberlain, 2018

firing schedules, and images. Since glazing can greatly influence the final outcome of a piece of work, it is important to be able to accurately recreate recipes and have comprehensive understanding of the chemistry that causes the desired und result.

Throughout my artistic process, I strive to create a sense of discovery within each piece of pottery that I produce. I want to create functional pottery that is aesthetically pleasing and inviting to use, but also entices the user to think of the broader references to a transitional landscape, medical imagery and a sense of discovery. My creative process is always subject to change but I feel very connected to this set of materials, mark making tools, and glazes. Although I have completed my final body of work as a graduate student, I only foresee a continuation of this process that I have dedicated myself to the past several years.

Show Concept

The body of work displayed at my final thesis exhibition combined references to medical imagery and also to my personal interpretation of the hidden interior of my body and the effects MS has on it. The

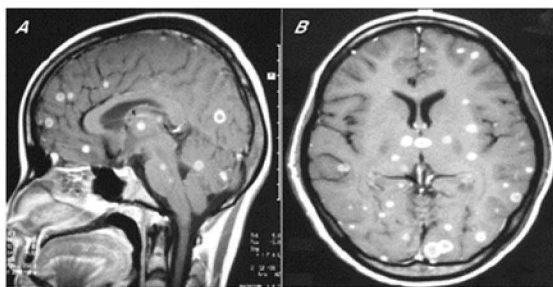


Figure 17: Brain MRI, 2017

work featured texture, line, and volume to reference the nervous system. Porcelain sprig molds applied to the surface, were left free of glaze, allowing them to stand out from the glazed surface in representation of brain lesions that appear in MRI imaging. During the process

of making this body work, I accentuated the body shape and volume of each piece by recessing sprig molds into the surface, creating a penumbra, or belly that cast a shadow below the voluminous potion of the pot. The interior indentations left behind during this process are a direct reference to the impact that the exterior has on the interior; nearly the inverse of the effects of invisible illness. Thick slip created rich textures covering the exterior of my pots, often referencing the cyclical motion of ocean waves. The familiar ebb and flow of tides runs in cycles, as the receding tides leave

behind reminders of the ocean's presence through lines in the sand, shells, and driftwood strewn across



Figure 18: Surface treatment, J. Chamberlain, 2017

the heavily textured beach. Similarly, symptoms associated with MS run in cycles of intensity, and with each relapse an invisible scar is left behind in the form of a new brain lesion or tremor of the hand. The ocean, a place I seek inspiration, solitude and healing, is ironically reminiscent of the very reason I require such sacred moments and places.

The ceramic body of work that I am currently working on includes a variety of functional tableware including place settings, mugs, bowls, pouring vessels and serving dishes. In addition, I am researching and creating contemporary versions of historic utilitarian vessels and forms that were made to use during pilgrimages to transport sacred items and served as a form of identification through the use of intricate symbols. I will continue to work with a clay body comprised primarily of porcelain and white stoneware. Each piece of work is adorned with textured surfaces and sprig molds which are applied in a manner that accentuates the volume of the forms and reference my influences.

My work in photography also references the link between medical imagery and the cyclical nature of the tides. My photographs illustrate the detailed textures found in the intimate space where the ocean meets the land and the natural objects left behind with the dramatic receding tides of the Alaskan coastline. I will continue to print these images in a large format and in black and white to not only accentuate the contrast and textures, but also to act as a reference or “landscape” for the viewers to become immersed in as they take time to examine the details of the functional ceramics that will be displayed in the foreground, which offer a different perspective by which I can introduce a conversation to the viewer. To

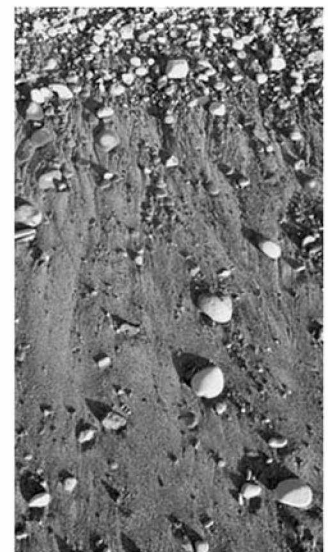


Figure 19: Intertidal Landscape, J. Chamberlain, 2017

further integrate these concepts, I am working with my own digital MRI scans and pairing them with macro and landscape images to visually present my interpretation of a hidden illness. I have taken over

2000 images and have begun the editing and printing process. In the end, my final body of work will be comprised of 18 images printed in a large format and mated and framed. I plan to hang these images in groups over displays of my ceramic work that reference similar textural elements. My ceramic work and images will be presented as a comprehensive final gallery exhibition titled, *Inside Out: An Exploration of A Hidden Illness Through Art*, in the fall of 2018. Exploring these subjects through their unusual and unexpected combinations has provided me with a healing and introspective experience that has greatly influenced my recent work. I expect this body of work to portray my inner-directed view of my body and the healing, grounding properties of a sense of place.

The Exhibition

As I began thinking of how to design the gallery space for my final exhibition, I thought about all of the other shows and exhibitions that I have seen in that space. As a visitor to the gallery I am first impacted by the entrance to the space. I often feel overwhelmed as I approach the entryway to the gallery. As a person living with MS I often evaluate the areas surrounding me and the path that I plan to travel in order to avoid obstacles, uneven ground, getting bumped and shoved, and simply orient myself in the direction that I wish to travel. Often as I enter the gallery space, I become overwhelmed and lose concentration as there is no clear starting and stopping point for the viewer. The design of the gallery was meant to transport the audience into an environment that encouraged exploration by highlighting a storyline that provided clues about the physical and conceptual context in which this body of work was created.

Thinking about the first impression of the gallery and establishing a storyline, or flow, I decided to create a hallway-like line of suspended walls that would provide a partition in the entryway of the gallery. This wall helped visitors slow down and take their time at the gallery entry. It is where my Artist statement was displayed along with a few pairings of ceramics pieces and photos. The pairings set a precedent for the viewer and establish the connection between my ceramic work and my photography. Finally, the wall encouraged an intentional flow of traffic. I arranged the gallery so that

certain groupings of work would be viewed first, next and last, completing the story and landscape that I set out to portray. Three large, double sided, canvas covered frames were suspended from the ceiling of



Figure 20: Suspended gallery walls, J. Chamberlain, 2018

the gallery several feet in front of the gallery entryway. With enough foot traffic moving through the space, the walls would gently sway, a movement reminiscent of waves. This corridor like space offered the viewer a quiet moment to enter the space, gain an understanding of the show and continue in an organized motion while observing the work and

experiencing the story and landscape that I have created.

After rounding the corner of the last suspended wall, the viewer would approach a long wall of black and white images with collections of oversized barnacles in clusters along sections of the wall. Below the images are pedestals displaying groupings of functional ceramics that feature textures reflected in the images hanging above them. The titles of both the images and the ceramic work hint at ocean landscapes and offer suggestions of the medical imagery's

influences.

The back wall of the gallery features one large landscape image that was projected from the ceiling. This image was meant to transport the viewers to the landscape that I drew most of my inspiration from. I wanted to allow the viewer to explore this landscape with as many senses as possible. All the details and textures displayed in my work came from this larger landscape which invokes other senses that I could not bring into the gallery space. The smell of the salty ocean, a cool



Figure 21: Projected Image, J. Chamberlain, 2018

breeze, eagles calling from the trees, and waves crashing onto the beach; these are all senses that I would like the viewer to experience when becoming immersed in this large image.

Around the remaining walls of the gallery, the viewer will find more of the same paired images with ceramic work but also small groupings of pedestals in the center. The only image in the gallery that was presented in color was the projection. This was done to reflect the colors of the ceramic work from



Figure 22: Gallery pairings, J. Chamberlain, 2018

the center pedestals and further reinforce the story line that I was writing for the audience. Clusters of barnacles encrusted the protruding sections of the gallery walls and corners. As the work progresses through the space the titles continue to reflect my interest in medical imagery and the connection, I have formed with the ocean landscape, finally leading the viewer's to the suspended walls where the story began. As each viewer moves through the space, experiencing this story, I hope they were able to do so at their own pace, gaining a greater understanding by the end. This exhibit became an abstract representation of my own experience making this body of work and writing my story of exploration,

diagnosis, understanding and advocacy for an invisible illness through art.

Conclusion

This project is a result of perplexing inquiry, a search for refuge, and a longing for healing and personal understanding. The process of completing this body of work proved to be arduous and enlightening, allowing for self-discovery and growth throughout. As I worked to install my final show, I felt an increasingly overwhelming feeling of satisfaction. When the gallery doors opened for the first public viewing, I was proud and felt accomplished. Not only because my work as a graduate student was concluding, but because I had achieved a better understanding of my own personal and artistic capabilities.

A once outlandish combination of juxtaposing concepts, my final body of work complemented one another bringing a sense of exploration to the viewer and advocacy for an invisible illness. Seeing all of my photography and ceramics side by side in the gallery, I realized that I had accomplished what I had set out to do during my MFA experience.

My Public presentation and defense were very well received by the public, faculty and my outside examiners. Much of the conversation that took place in the gallery was complementary. I went into my defense with some hesitancy about how my show concept would be received and if the viewers would see the two bodies of work as complementary. My fears were quickly extinguished as the conversation turned to the cohesiveness of the work. We also discussed the clarity of the subject matter and references. Making functional ceramic work for a final thesis exhibition can be risky, however the faculty discussed how the functional work and photography reflected one another and referenced the medical imagery that I spoke about in my artist statement and public presentation.

At my reception, I was excited and relieved to hear more of the same comments from the general public that came in support of my final show. Nearly everyone I spoke with commented on the clarity of my subject matter and cohesiveness of the work. Additionally, I had many conversations about the success of the suspended gallery walls and overall arrangement of the work and photographs.

Overall, I feel that my final body of work was a success. As I continue on after graduate school I plan to continue working in ceramics as a studio potter focusing on functional forms. I will also continue to take images and pair them with my ceramics. The thought of setting up my own studio is daunting but rewarding and encourages me to maintain my creative momentum. Since my final exhibition, my work has been accepted into a gallery in Homer, Alaska and I plan to pursue other galleries to exhibit and sell my work. Entering into the professional world as a ceramic artist reinforces my success as an MFA student and propels me into future endeavors in the exploration of ceramics and photography.

In the end, my hope is that through this project and body of work, I was able to communicate and share some aspects of living with an invisible illness and the strong effect a sense of place has on the healing and understanding of an otherwise grave, complex diagnosis.

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Artist Statement
Jenny Chamberlain

Just over one year ago I was unexpectedly diagnosed with an aggressive form of multiple sclerosis (MS), a hidden disease—one that attacks the protective coating of nerves around the spinal cord with unpredictable and damaging effects. Despite the diagnosis, it remains an enigma: symptoms shift undetected beneath the surface causing degenerative physical and cognitive effects. My desire to understand the invisible illness hidden inside of a seeming undamaged exterior fuels my creative process allowing me to give an invisible illness a voice. My work combines references to medical imagery and also to my personal interpretation of the unseen interior of my body and the effects MS has on it. Throughout my ceramic work and my photography, I reference textures, lines and volume that assimilate with those found in medical imagery. These elements also reference within the intimate space where the ocean meets the land, a place I seek inspiration, solitude and healing. Ironically, this landscape is reminiscent of the very reason I require such sacred moments and places. The familiar ebb and flow of tides run in cycles, as the receding tides leave behind reminders of the ocean's presence through lines in the sand, shells, and driftwood strewn across the heavily textured beach. Similarly, symptoms associated with MS run in cycles of intensity, and with each relapse an invisible scar is left behind. I do not want this diagnosis to define me or my work as a ceramic artist, but as a result of my constantly changing circumstances I have a renewed sense of excitement and purpose. Although this illness is hidden within my body and causes uncertainty in my daily life, my artistic practice brings me clarity and focus and is essential to my healing process.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

- M.F.A.** Expected December 2018, University of Alaska Fairbanks
Concentration in Ceramics, Minor in Photography
- 2014, Certificate, Resilience & Adaptation Program, University of Alaska
Fairbanks
Concentration Art and Natural Resource Management
- B.S.** 2011, University of Montana, College of Forestry and Conservation
Recreation Resource Management
- 2006, Milwaukee Area Technical College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- 2002-2003, Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North Carolina
Art and Outdoor Recreation & Leadership

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2012-present** Owner, J. Chamberlain Pottery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2017** Apprenticeship, Mill Creek Pottery (Simon Levin), Gresham, Wisconsin (6
Months)
- 2015-2016** Ceramics Instructor, University of Alaska Fairbanks
- 2012-2014** Ceramics Instructor, REACH, Juneau, Alaska
Ceramics Instructor, The Canvas, Juneau, Alaska
Studio Assistant, The Pottery (Joyce Payne), Juneau, Alaska
- 2008** Teaching Assistant, Art Outreach Program, Stumptown Art Studio, Whitefish,
Montana
- 2006-2008** Gallery Assistant, Cedar Creek Gallery, Cedarburg, Wisconsin

2006-2008 Ceramics Instructor and Studio Assistant, Darkstar Galleria & Studio, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

PRIZES, FELLOWSHIPS, AND GRANTS

Fall 2018 Thesis/Dissertation Completion Fellowship, University of Alaska Fairbanks Graduate School

2015-2018 Graduate Student Teaching Assistantship, University of Alaska Fairbanks Art Department

2017 The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Arctic Division Larus Prize (Outstanding Graduate Presentation)

2016 Resilience and Adaptation Program Fellowship, University of Alaska Fairbanks

2015 Associated Students of the University of Alaska Fairbanks (ASUAF) Travel Grant

2014-2015 Resilience and Adaptation Program Fellowship, University of Alaska Fairbanks

2011 Recreation Management Excellence Scholarship, University of Montana

2009 SPOT Award, U.S. Forest Service

EXHIBITIONS

2018 Solo Exhibition, *Inside Out; A Hidden Illness Explored Through Art*, University of Alaska Fairbanks, September 10-25

2018 Juried Exhibition, *Geaux Cups*, Clay Center of New Orleans, February, 2018

Juried Exhibition, International Ceramic Artists Network, National Council on the Education for Ceramic Arts Conference, Pittsburgh, PA., Juried by Forrest Gard, Associate Editor of Ceramics Monthly and Pottery Making Illustrated, March 14-16

Group Exhibition, MFA Student Show, *In Pursuit*, University of Alaska Fairbanks Fine Art Gallery, January 2018

2017 Group Exhibition, Digital Darkroom, University of Alaska Fairbanks Fine Art Gallery, December 2017

Group Exhibition, Keller Architecture and Allied Arts Gallery, October 6-27, 2017

2016 Group Exhibition, MFA Student Show, *Works In Progress*, University of Alaska Fairbanks Fine Art Gallery, October 2016

Group Exhibition, Digital Darkroom, University of Alaska Fairbanks Fine Art Gallery, December 2016

2015 Group Exhibition, MFA Student Show, University of Alaska Fairbanks Fine Art Gallery, December 2015

Group Exhibition, Beginning Digital, University of Alaska Wood Center, December 2015

Juried Exhibition, Student Art Show, University of Alaska Fairbanks Fine Art Gallery, October 2015

2006 Group Exhibition, Darkstar Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 2006

LECTURES AND PRESENTATIONS

2018 Poster Presentation, "Inside Out; A Hidden Illness Explored Through Art," AAAS National Conference, Austin, Texas, February 14-19, 2018

2017 Invited Presenter, "Inside Out; A Hidden Illness Explored Through Art", The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Arctic Division, University of Alaska Fairbanks, October 14, 2017

Invited Presenter, "Inside Out; A Hidden Illness Explored Through Art", The Resilience and Adaptation Program, The University of Alaska Fairbanks, September 22, 2017

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE / AFFILIATIONS

College Art Association, Member since 2016

National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts, Member since 2013

The American Association for the Advancement of Science, Member since 2017

University of Alaska Fairbanks Student Ceramic Arts Guild, Member since 2015

Fairbanks Arts Association, Member since 2017

Homer Arts Council, Member since 2015

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